



**TESTIMONY BY JEROME RINGO
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NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION
BEFORE THE
HOUSE TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE SUBCOMMITTEES ON
WATER RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT AND
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
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Distinguished Committee members, thank you for inviting me to provide testimony today on behalf of the National Wildlife Federation and our four million members and supporters. The rebuilding of New Orleans and the Gulf coast is a top priority, not just for the National Wildlife Federation and our state affiliates, the Louisiana Wildlife Federation and Mississippi Wildlife Federation, but personally for me as a native Louisianan and as an evacuee of Hurricane Rita.

Louisiana has a well-deserved reputation as a sportsman's paradise. Like so many others from my state, I grew up fishing, catching crabs and hunting for duck, goose and deer. I grew up among people whose livelihoods were tied to the year's catch of fish, shrimp, and oysters. So I feel very personally the dramatic loss—up to 24 square miles per year now—of the wetlands that support our abundant wildlife and fisheries and the economic vitality of our State. I also spent more than 20 years working in the petrochemical industry in Louisiana, so I know well how important our coastal wetlands are to the nation's energy security. But the fight to restore Louisiana's coast is not just about wildlife and fisheries, or about oil and gas. It is about the health and safety of our people. It is about restoring the natural buffers that protect our communities and lessen the destruction of our property. The need to restore Louisiana's coast has only been amplified in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

As we set about the task of rebuilding New Orleans, which will include strengthening levees against future storms, we must recognize equally the importance of restoring the vast complex of coastal marshlands and barrier islands that constitute our first line of defense. And I cannot emphasize enough, both as a conservationist and as a former industry employee, that we cannot provide blanket waivers of our nation's most fundamental environmental statutes for what will be a multi-year rebuilding effort. We want the citizens of New Orleans who return to their native city to take comfort in knowing that their water is safe to drink, their air safe to breathe, and their backyards safe for children to play in. Simply put, when we rebuild New Orleans, we must rebuild it right.

Hurricane Katrina demonstrates the fundamental connection between the health and safety of people and communities and the health of natural resources like rivers, wetlands, estuaries and coasts. Perhaps never before has a natural disaster of this magnitude affected such a large swath of American homeland. Hurricane Katrina also demonstrates the need to fundamentally change the way we deal with our water resources so that our rivers, coasts, wetlands and floodplains will be better able to protect us from the next big storm.

We must insist that sound science, accumulated in the years of study of the Gulf coast, its vanishing wetlands and its vulnerable communities, guide the decisions on how and where we rebuild. We must respect the natural ecology of the Mississippi River, and allow it to perform its natural task of nourishing and maintaining a vibrant delta and system of barrier islands that buffer inland communities.

Furthermore, we must address global warming, a threat that looms large over coastal areas prone to severe storms. Warmer ocean temperatures fuel more powerful storms. Additionally, the sea level rise expected to occur due to global warming, combined with the elimination and disappearance of vital wetlands, will exacerbate storm surges that can engulf communities and destroy the very infrastructure meant to protect them.

Restore America's Wetland

The people of Louisiana have long understood the importance of their coastal wetlands to the vitality and security of the region. We know that a quarter of all the oil and gas consumed in America and 80 percent of the nation's offshore oil and gas travels through Louisiana's wetlands. We know that 30 percent of the nation's fish catch comes from the Louisiana coast. And we have witnessed, in our lifetimes, the disintegration of large portions of the coastal marsh and swamplands that once stretched for miles across our coastline.

For more than a decade, the state and its allies in the conservation community and the business and industrial sectors have sought the federal government's help to restore this vast wetland ecosystem for the benefit of the people of South Louisiana and for the country's economic well being. Hurricane Katrina has now focused the nation's attention on this same objective. The time has come to make restoring America's wetland a national priority.

We call upon Congress to authorize and fund a bold, expedited coastal restoration program in an emergency supplemental appropriation bill. In particular, we recommend a \$5.5 billion Louisiana Coastal Area Ecosystem Restoration Program that includes the following:

1. a series of pipeline and diversion projects that will deliver freshwater and sediment to the coastal area to rebuild and restore coastal wetlands and barrier islands;

2. land acquisition, easements, and where appropriate, the relocation of infrastructure, in order to facilitate the restoration of coastal wetlands and reduce future flood losses;
3. an ongoing science and technology program and a demonstration program that will ensure the feasibility and ecological integrity of the restoration effort;
4. an expedited Mississippi River Management study to determine the feasibility of relocating the main shipping entrance to the Mississippi River, and funding to implement the project if feasible;
5. the completion within four years of feasibility studies for other large-scale diversion and land-building projects.

A restoration program of this scale will require engineering and scientific capability that exceeds the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' existing resources. We therefore recommend that Congress create an independent commission within the Department of the Army to oversee the design, evaluation, and implementation of this accelerated restoration effort. This commission could contract not only with the Corps and other federal and state agencies and institutions as appropriate, it could also employ such mechanisms as private design competitions. To raise the profile and emphasize the urgency of this effort, we recommend that the Commissioners be appointed by the President, in consultation with the Governor of Louisiana, and be answerable to an interagency task force.

On behalf of the people of my state, I cannot overstate the importance of integrating flood protection and restoration as we seek to rebuild New Orleans and the region's coast. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the American people have shared our anguish over the loss of life and property and the crippling of a great American city. They have demonstrated tremendous generosity to the people of Louisiana and the Gulf coast, opening their cities, their checkbooks, and even their homes to those who lost everything to this storm. Now we need them to help us rebuild, not just the buildings and roads and infrastructure that were destroyed, and not even just the levees that gave way, but the very landscape that supports and protects all those people and makes possible all that commercial activity. We call upon you, as their elected representatives, to embrace this task. It cannot be done in a business-as-usual frame of mind. It is an extraordinary undertaking, requiring new mechanisms for funding, oversight, and implementation. The urgency of restoring Louisiana's coastal wetlands, which continue to disappear by the hour, requires an accelerated action plan, dedicated long-term funding, and a firm commitment at all levels of government and across all agencies of government to get the job done.

Current rebuilding proposals

While we commend the intent of Senators Vitter and Landrieu to respond to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in a quick, but comprehensive manner, the National Wildlife Federation does not believe that the PELICAN Act moves the recovery effort in the right direction. We understand the pressure imposed on the Louisiana delegation to put forth a

comprehensive package, but elements of this bill could undermine the very protections needed to ensure we rebuild it right.

Specifically, the bill would establish a commission in charge of approving and funding \$40 billion in Corps projects without oversight from Congress. In addition, there is no scientific oversight of the restoration projects that are so vital to providing protection against future storms. Under this legislation, any project approved by this new commission will automatically be deemed to be in compliance with NEPA and the Clean Water Act. As I just stated, this is not a time to be waiving our fundamental environmental statutes, but to ensure that a revitalized Louisiana adheres to the most basic health and environmental standards.

Develop Responsible National Water Policy

Hurricane Katrina provided a stark wake up call not only to the residents of New Orleans but to Americans everywhere on how we address water resource needs in this country. In the aftermath of the storm it has become clearer and clearer that our nation does not have an objective, reliable system to prioritize its water resource needs.

If there are lessons for the entire nation, they must include a thorough and hard look at what are painfully obvious failures of our water policies and how we set the nation's priorities for choosing water-related projects and how we are allocating limited funds.

As a recent Washington Post article painstakingly outlines, despite receiving the most Corps of Engineers funds for any state, for years we in Louisiana have tended to favor spending on navigation and dredging projects over flood safety and environmental protection, favored new construction projects over maintenance of existing projects, and tended to put off what were obvious needs for our population centers in favor of special interests.

More and more we have seen our nation's priorities being set by politics rather than by clear, rational analysis of truly national needs and it is time to stop and examine what fundamental changes are necessary.

Principles of wise reconstruction

We must fundamentally adopt a principle of reconstructing and rebuilding much safer communities. Many parts of New Orleans and other Gulf Coast communities have been plagued with repeated flooding problems where buildings were repaired or rebuilt in the same locations and the same elevations without mitigating their risk. These communities and their residents continue to face problems of emergency services, property damage, health concerns and social disruptions again and again. In addition, we must learn to fundamentally respect the natural functions of floodplains, marshes, barrier islands and dunes to reduce the damaging impacts of storm surge and flooding. And finally, we must rebuild with equity and fairness for the welfare of all the people involved.

Unheeded lessons of the past

Sadly, we have often failed to act on the lessons of the previous natural disasters. In the wake of the Great Midwest Flood of 1993, when some \$16 billion in damages occurred, 60,000 to 80,000 homes and businesses were flooded, and more than 1000 levees broke, a major review was conducted into the causes of the flood and what should be done to reduce the likelihood of recurrence of such devastation.

Among the major recommendations were:

- Passage of a national Floodplain Management Act that would delineate roles and responsibilities at all levels of government and the private sector and guide federal policy regarding development and use of floodplains;
- Updating the basic “Principles and Guidelines” playbook for Corps of Engineers and other agencies’ water projects to set environmental quality and national economic development as equally important objectives;
- Reestablishing a Water Resources Council to better coordinate water resources activities;
- Improving the use of non-structural approaches as a complement to traditional structural flood damage reduction strategies; and
- Providing a high-level of protection (“standard flood” or “500-year” level) for existing urban population centers and critical facilities, while at the same time directing new development and critical facilities out of the floodplain and out of harm’s way.

It has now been more than 22 years since the basic Principles for planning federal water resources projects have been updated, and it has been increasingly shown that there is a strong need for greater oversight and accountability in the planning process.

Unfortunately, this recommendation as well as most of the other recommendations I mentioned went unheeded and remain unimplemented to this day. We strongly urge the Congress to address these issues in the coming months to provide the desperately needed direction in project planning priority setting that remains lacking.

Katrina investigations

We anticipate that there will be investigations into Katrina as well. Any Katrina investigation must be comprehensive and must analyze the water resource management issues and decisions that may have exacerbated the impacts of the hurricanes on communities in the Gulf region. Such an investigation should be conducted by an independent panel of experts so that it is free from politics and partisanship. And we must learn from the past by ensuring these recommendations are not set on a shelf to gather dust.

Address Global Warming

The need to restore Louisiana's wetlands to absorb the shock of future storms is all the more critical in the face of global warming. Global warming is a reality today. For me and for millions of Gulf Coast residents, global warming has hit home.

Scientists are telling us that hurricanes today are more ferocious than they were in the past due in part to global warming. In a peer-reviewed study published in *Nature*, tropical storm researcher Kerry Emanuel of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology showed that major storms spinning in both the Atlantic and the Pacific since the 1970s have increased by about 50 percent in both duration and intensity. Scientists attribute this increase in storm intensity to warmer ocean temperatures.

The pollution we emit from smokestacks and tailpipes is warming not only the air, but also the oceans, and warm water is high octane fuel to a tropical storm or hurricane. Ocean temperatures have increased over the past decades as global atmospheric temperatures have gone up. Warmer ocean waters provided the fuel that gave Hurricanes Katrina and Rita their ferocious energy as they hit the Gulf Coast.

Scientists also warn that the longer we delay action on global warming, the more we will see devastating storms like Katrina and Rita.

Why has Congress been ignoring the experts and delaying credible action to confront global warming? If you do not want to take the word of independent scientists, how about the findings of the Bush administration, which has never been accused of being an alarmist voice for global warming action. Three years ago, the Bush administration warned in their Climate Action Report that hurricanes "are likely to have higher wind speeds and produce more rainfall" as a result of global warming. This calls into question whether the current standards that we now employ for coastal building, placement, and construction properly anticipate the future conditions we may be facing.

The Bush administration's report also warned that "Coastal communities will be at greater risk of storm surges" due to global warming. Global warming has already caused sea levels to rise globally and along the Gulf coast by about a half foot, worsening the storm surge that swamped Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. The rise in sea level from global warming will continue to accelerate as glaciers and ice caps melt and as water expands due to warmer temperatures.

A 2002 government report predicted that sea-level rise caused by global warming could swallow sizable chunks of the coastal United States in the coming century: In a worst-case scenario, sea level along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts would be more than three feet higher by mid-century and 23,000 square miles of land along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts could disappear, thereby erasing vital wetlands, swamping barrier islands and otherwise removing the natural protections our shorelines have against the storm surges that threaten people and wildlife.

Insurance companies are warning that parts of Florida and the Gulf Coast could become uninsurable, and some companies have already begun pulling out.

Solutions that reduce global warming pollution while growing the economy are within reach if Congress shows leadership on this issue. More than 170 mayors have called on Congress to act. As we continue to procrastinate, U.S. pollution levels are climbing, getting worse rather than better. The United States emitted 13 percent more global warming pollution in 2003 than it did in 1990, despite U.S. commitments under the 1992 Rio Treaty to halt the growth in emissions. The buildup of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has reached a point greater than at any time in the past 400,000 years.

Global warming is no longer a problem that can be pushed off on our grandchildren decades from now. Congress' inaction on global warming is already having real and tragic consequences on our children today. The global warming pollution we emit in the coming years will linger in the atmosphere for more than a century. Our children will not be able to flick a switch and reverse what we have done.

One vital first step Congress can take is to enact the Climate Stewardship Act, a bipartisan action plan that sets achievable goals for reducing U.S. global warming pollution. The bill allows business to implement their own solutions, using a flexible emissions trading system that has successfully reduced acid rain pollution in the United States at a fraction of projected costs. If Congress sets clear goals and safeguards to curb pollution, American industry will become the driving force behind solving global warming, instead of being the lead contributor to an escalating environmental disaster.

Conclusion

There is no question that we must rebuild the great city of New Orleans and other impacted areas of our Gulf coast. But if we are to avoid creating another generation of victims we must rebuild it right. To do this, any reconstruction effort must go hand-in-hand with an ecologically sound restoration of coastal Louisiana. We must update the Corps' playbook, while also establishing a set of criteria to help prioritize our nation's water projects. All these efforts will be for naught if this country does not address the looming threat of global warming.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.